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Statement submitted by Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.

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Statement

The Sisters of Mercy of the Americas welcome the opportunity to address the 63rd session of the Commission on the Status of Women with priority theme, 'Social Protection Systems, Access to Public Services and Sustainable Infrastructure for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women and Girls.' This priority theme brings to the forefront Sustainable Development Goal five and highlights in particular, Sustainable Development Goal one, four, six, eight, nine, ten, and eleven. In order to address gender inequalities and empower women and girls, policies must recognize their diversity and not treat them as a homogenous group. In this statement, we draw attention to rural women and girls who are disproportionately impacted by exclusion from social protection systems, lack of access to public services, and lack of sustainable infrastructure.

Social protection floors are a human right creating pathways for other human rights. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) recognizes social protection floors as sets of basic social security guarantees which those in need have access to over their life cycle. This includes, at minimum, essential health care and basic income security. Despite their significance, according to a recent ILO data estimates, comprehensive social protection systems are not accessible to three-quarters or 71 per cent of the global population. We know that women are disadvantaged due to gender inequalities and make up the large percentage of the unprotected. States' failure to provide this bare minimum compromises women and girls' capacity to make meaningful contributions to their societies.

As Sisters of Mercy working globally with women and girls on the ground, we have learned that exclusion from vital social protection policies such as income security, education and employment opportunities, make them vulnerable to exploitation, especially human trafficking. Due to their lack of access to education, women and girls are often marginalized and fall prey to trafficking. As highlighted in our recently published anti-human trafficking advocacy handbook "Inherent Dignity", preventing these and other exploitations of women and girls requires addressing the underlying causes, including their exclusion from social protection floors, lack of access to education, and job opportunities.

We join UN-Women in claiming that the exclusion of women and girls from social protection systems combined with lack of access to public services and sustainable infrastructures perpetuate gender inequalities. In most societies, due to cultural and social gender norms, the burden of unpaid child care and domestic duties fall on women and girls, which restrict them from engaging in education, formal employment and government. The burden on rural women and girls is compounded due to lack of critical infrastructures like paved roads, safe and affordable public transportation, and easily accessible water. They expend lots of time and energy and risk their safety walking long distances on undeveloped roads to collect water, which is often non-potable. Therefore, it is critical that States empower women by fulfilling their human right to water, and other critical infrastructures to ensure their right to an adequate standard of living.

We are concerned that lack of access to childcare forces women to enter the informal sector, where they are often excluded from contributory social protection systems. Sustainable Development Goal target 5.4 calls for a recognition of "the value of unpaid care and domestic work through provisions of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies," and greater gender equality in the division of these works. It is imperative that States create social protection policies that put economic value to unpaid care and domestic duties. When States provide accessible and affordable child care, they are making a valuable investment. This enables women to

participate in the labour market, tapping into their economic potential and empowering them to be self-sufficient and valued leaders in their societies.

Social protection programmes that fail to take into account the various barriers to access continue to marginalize rural women and girls. For instance, lack of access to a safe and affordable public transportation means rural women cannot travel far to register and receive social protection programmes. Lack of educational opportunities for rural women and girls often means illiteracy which makes it difficult for them to understand complicated application processes. Additionally, lack of public services like accessible and affordable child care often means that women cannot take advantage of job training programmes. The 2030 Agenda offers integrative approaches for States to address these inequalities in their national policies.

Social protection policies like cash transfers seek to alleviate income insecurity and provide the funds necessary for basic health care needs and educational opportunities for children. However, we reject cash transfer programmes that are designed in a way that reinforce harmful gender norms. For instance, when conditional cash transfer programmes impose requirements on women to take their children to receive vaccinations, it places the burden solely on women who are often faced with inaccessibility of public services and infrastructures. We must eliminate these conditionalities that continue to perpetuate harmful gender norms. It is however important that cash transfers are given specifically to women because in some cultures they do not have access to household financial resources and are not allowed to participate in financial decision-making.

Furthermore, research has found that cash transfer programmes are not sufficient for comprehensively addressing women's exclusion from social protection systems. These programmes alone fail to move beyond addressing the immediate material needs of women and girls. Empowering women requires providing cash transfer as well as job training programmes, whereby they can receive skills that are in demand in the labour market. These programmes view women as active participants. We must deconstruct gender norms and see women as equal contributors to the workforce.

To conclude, The Sisters of Mercy across the globe insist that women and girls be recognized and valued for their inherent dignity and contributions to a sustainable world. This implies that they must be active participants in the development, implementation and review phase of social protection, infrastructure, and public service programmes.

Recommendations

The interconnectedness of social protection, sustainable infrastructure and public services cannot be underestimated. Therefore, we call on Member States to:

- Recognize comprehensive social protection measures as a human right for all.
- Implement social protection measures that take into account the public service and infrastructure barriers that burden women and girls.
- Adopt a holistic approach to the 230 Agenda, recognizing the interconnectedness of all the Sustainable Development Goals for the empowerment of women and girls, specifically noting Sustainable Development Goal one, four, five, six, eight, nine, ten, and eleven.
- Empower women and girls by implementing sustainable infrastructures, including accessible, safe and affordable public transportation systems, and clean and accessible water.

- Provide public services, including accessible and affordable child care and health care facilities. Additionally, implement Sustainable Development Goal target 5.4 by placing an economic value to unpaid child care and domestic work.
- Integrate a review and monitoring mechanisms for social protection, public service and infrastructure programmes, to ensure that their designs do not reinforce harmful gender norms.
- Ensure that women and girls are active participants in the development, implementation, and review of social protection programmes.